Executive Summary

In 1993, the Washington State Legislature established the goal of introducing high-speed ground transportation between Seattle and Spokane by the year 2030 (RCW 47.79.020).

Currently, there is passenger rail service between these cities. Amtrak provides passenger rail service via its *Empire Builder*, which connects Seattle and Portland with Chicago, Illinois. While traveling within the state of Washington, however, the *Empire Builder* operates during late evening and early morning hours. Local communities across eastern Washington support this service, but they also believe there is a need for a new, intrastate passenger train that travels during daylight hours.

This strong local support, combined with the legislature's mandate, has led to the development of this preliminary feasibility study.

What is the purpose of this preliminary feasibility study?

An in-depth study of the feasibility of introducing new Amtrak service on all three potential east-west rail corridors was slated to begin in Winter 2000. However, passage of Initiative 695 in November 1999 resulted in a 90 percent decrease in funding for this study. As a result, a comprehensive analysis was not possible. In an effort to begin the study process, however, this limited feasibility study was completed.

The purpose of this study is twofold:

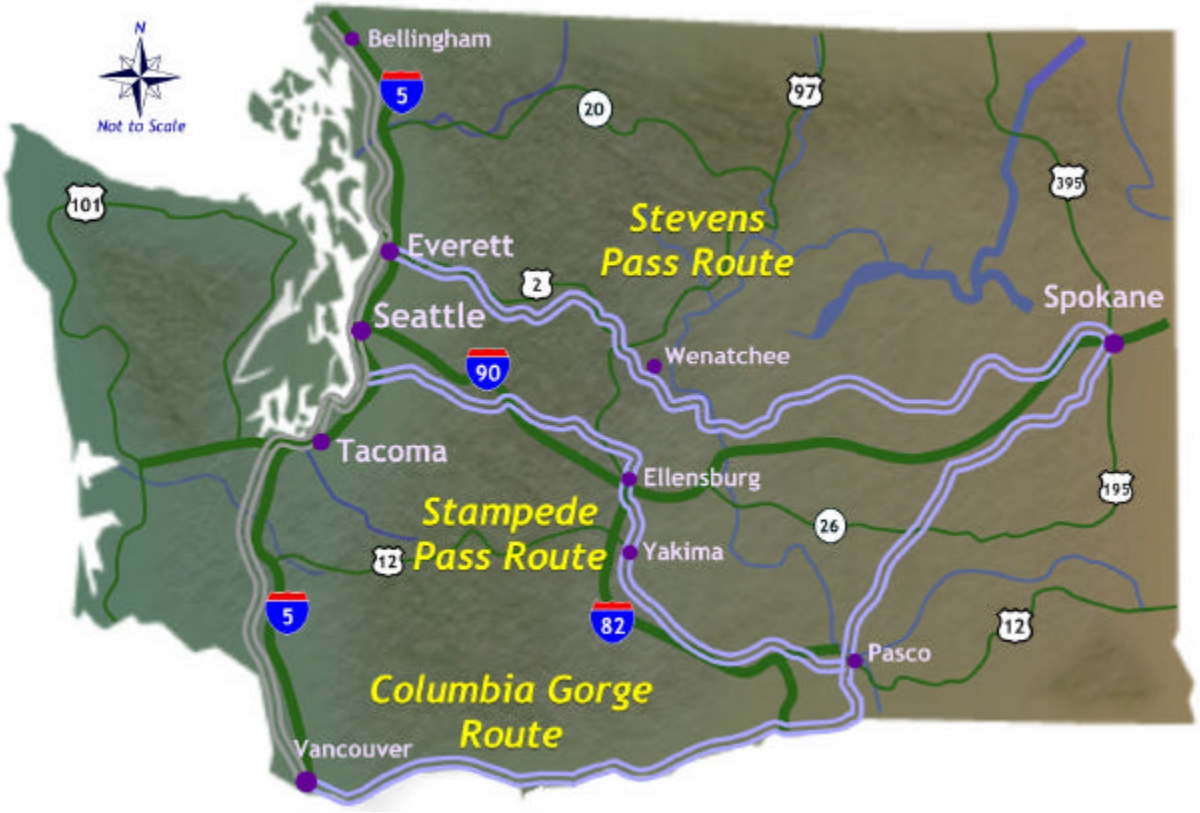
- This study provides a preliminary assessment of the feasibility of Amtrak service on the Stampede Pass rail corridor. The Stampede Pass rail corridor was chosen for analysis because it is the only east-west rail line that currently does not have passenger rail service; and
- This study also provides a baseline review of existing east-west rail corridors in Washington State. This review discusses the general existing conditions along the rail routes and potential obstacles to passenger rail expansion. This baseline assessment was designed as a foundation for further analysis of the east-west rail corridors and can be found in **Appendix A.**

What did the East-West Rail Feasibility Study find?

The Stampede Pass route preliminary assessment provides a limited analysis of the operational and physical requirements necessary to implement daily, daylight passenger rail service along the Stampede Pass route.

Based on this preliminary feasibility study, as well the team's general knowledge of the east-west rail corridors, a number of conclusions were developed:

Exhibit ES.1
Existing East-West Rail Corridors



The introduction of daylight passenger rail service along the Stampede Pass route is physically and operationally feasible.

This analysis indicates that Amtrak service along Stampede Pass is physically and operationally feasible, but further analysis of this route should be performed in the years ahead to obtain accurate ridership, scheduling, and cost information.

Significant infrastructure improvements will be needed.

In order to provide safe and reliable Amtrak service on the Stampede Pass route, more than $350 million in infrastructure improvements will be needed. This estimate assumes at least one daily Seattle-Spokane round-trip. For example, this could be a single daily morning departure from Seattle and a single daily morning departure from Spokane.

Minimum infrastructure improvements to implement this daylight passenger rail service over the Stampede Pass route would include:

- Six or 16 miles of new track (second main track or sidings) between Auburn and Pasco (depending on the type of service and vehicle used);
- Centralized Traffic Control between Auburn and Pasco;
- Station improvements;
- Grade crossing improvements; and
- Purchase or lease of train equipment.

These improvements will cost more than $350 million. However, these improvements would also provide for more efficient freight movement along the Stampede Pass line, as well as additional frequencies of passenger service beyond the minimum service discussed in this report.

The scheduled travel time between Seattle and Spokane would be at least 7 hours and 21 minutes.

Depending on the type of train equipment used along the route, total travel time between Seattle and Spokane would range from 7 hours and 21 minutes to 7 hours and 43 minutes. The use of conventional equipment, in conjunction with express service, accounts for the longer travel time. These travel times also assume that all recommended improvements, as well as changes in speed limits, are in place.

Additional study will be required to estimate whether ticket sales will offset operating costs.

It is estimated that it would cost $14 million per year for one daily Seattle - Spokane round trip. These operating costs would be at least partially offset by ticket sales. Due to limited funding, this study was not able to estimate ridership or ticket sales. As a result, it is not possible to estimate the degree to which ticket sales will offset operating costs associated with this new service. Therefore, additional analysis is recommended.

Express freight service along the route appears feasible and could help offset operating costs.

Amtrak often provides express freight service as a means to offset the cost of passenger rail service. Time sensitive shipments are placed in freight cars that are then coupled to passenger trains. The Washington Fruit Express program, currently in development, will carry Washington State produce to east coast markets via Amtrak's *Empire Builder*. New Seattle-Spokane Amtrak service would provide exceptional opportunities to transport more Washington produce to east coast markets. In combination with ticket sales, revenues from this freight express service could help offset operating costs.

It is not yet possible to accurately assess the Stevens Pass route or the Columbia River Gorge route.

More analysis in the years ahead would be required to determine if these routes could handle additional passenger rail service. The preliminary analysis included in **Appendix A** of this report indicates that there is currently extensive rail traffic on both of these routes.

It will take many years to make new East-West passenger rail service a reality.

This preliminary analysis indicates that the service along the Stampeded Pass rail corridor is physically and operationally feasible. However, costs identified for the introduction of the service are very expensive, and it is unlikely that partnership funding of this magnitude could be obtained under the state's current transportation funding mechanisms and the backlog of transportation projects already identified.

What next steps are recommended over the next several years?

In light of the findings of this preliminary assessment, the study team recommends that Washington State undertake a detailed study of the feasibility of east-west passenger rail service on all three east-west rail corridors. This detailed study should include:

- Refined capital and operation cost estimates;
- Origin and destination analysis and ridership projections; and
- A thorough assessment of east-west freight rail traffic data and growth projections.

This information, when considered in its entirety, will be the foundation upon which full analysis of the costs and benefits of such a service can be based.